

Extinction, rebellion and Extinction Rebellion

A Green House Gas by John Foster

This gas is an extended review of three publications:

This Civilisation is Finished: Conversations on the end of Empire – and what lies beyond, by Rupert Read and Samuel Alexander, Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2019.

Truth and its consequences: A pamphlet, addressed to fellow rebels, on strategy, and on soul, by Rupert Read <https://medium.com/@rupertiread/truth-and-its-consequences-eb2faa5eb458> (August 2019)

Common Sense for the 21st Century: Only non-violent rebellion can now stop climate breakdown and social collapse, by Roger Hallam, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2019.

We need to recognise the immediate political context of these urgently timely publications for what it is. Last December's UK general election was a national tragedy unparalleled in peacetime.

This tragedy was not, or not principally, a matter of Brexit – although even that is no longer simply the black comedy of errors to which we had perhaps become resigned. Millions who, out of a confused but genuine craving to re-establish their own country in what they took to be their own image, helped to vote a malign charlatan into unrestrained office, will now be foremost in paying the economic and social price of the havoc which he and his blundering government will wreak. While there is a certain grim appropriateness about this, such driven self-damage clearly also has its tragic dimension.

But vastly more important was the missed opportunity to begin seriously confronting the climate crisis. Brexit no doubt matters, but the human habitability of the planet matters incomparably more. And in an election for which Extinction Rebellion, the school strikes and Sir David Attenborough had combined to make the issues more glaringly evident to anyone with a brain and a conscience than ever before, the party touting the feeblest, most vacuous and least credible emissions-reduction proposals was returned with a thumping majority. Meanwhile the Green Party, standing on much the strongest relevant platform, increased its overall vote share to 2.7% (yes, that's *increased*) and retained as an MP the sainted but still solitary Caroline Lucas. Yet again, it was demonstrated that people of goodwill remain caught in a dilemma between on the one hand, increasingly widespread concern at climate destabilization and intergenerational and interspecies vandalism, and on the other hand a deep uncertainty over how to give political form and real momentum to the drastic changes in lifestyles and life-commitments which taking such concern seriously would require.

The rapidly narrowing time-window now insists on this dilemma as tragic. It is so, as are the relevant aspects of Brexit, in the full sense of that term: the sense in which human strengths and aspirations are always tending to undermine themselves, and our most firmly-held values to find themselves in grievously intractable conflict. In the climate and ecological case

this deep-seated pattern locks us into a technological destructiveness which we increasingly condemn, but seem quite unable to stop ourselves embracing. From this bind, as December's result shows with surely decisive finality, there will be no escape through merely electoral politics.

The huge distinction of the short book and pair of pamphlets here under review is that they all, in their different ways, rise to the tragic challenge now unfolding. This is most clearly so in the case of Read and Alexander's work, but the substantial pamphlet by Hallam runs it a close second. The author of this latter is the co-founder and a principal UK leader of the Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement, in which Read has also played a prominent part, and the prospects for that potentially transformative uprising are a central concern of all three publications. Between them they confront the starkest issue of our time: where is the energy to come from for the quite unprecedented kind of revolution which is now all that stands between humanity and catastrophe? For as they make plain, nothing less than revolution will now do. And revolutions themselves are inherently tragic – they happen when something has become so intolerable that it must be changed at no matter what cost to other concerns and values. These writings all ask the key questions at that level of seriousness. Their answers remain, as I shall argue, partial, but that in itself may help to provoke the still more radical thinking which we desperately need. We have here the bravest and closest approaches now being made to facing the full reality of our plight.

Read is a philosopher as well as a committed activist, and *This Civilisation is Finished* is presented in dialogue format, with some of its material being (very accessibly) philosophical. But it isn't really a *philosophical dialogue*, in the classic mould of Plato, Berkeley and Hume. Alexander is certainly no stooge of the "Yes, Socrates, how could one possibly dispute it?" variety, but nor, except for a brief passage on third world development, is he a source of any substantive disagreement. He is more like a sympathetic and extremely well-briefed interviewer, preparing the ground for Read to set out his views. This is done in a series of cogent, clearly-linked and readable chapters, so that one's irritation at the slightly arch format is quickly assuaged. But I make no apology for focusing here exclusively on what Read himself has to say.

The book starts from a brief but uncompromisingly honest presentation of what is now the threat of civilisational collapse and even human extinction arising from anthropogenic climate change. It makes the vital point in this connection that to flag up this threat is not to be, in the standard trope of dismissal, "alarmist" – any more than Churchill was alarmist about German re-armament in the nineteen-thirties. Rather it is to *raise the alarm*, where that is now (as Greta Thunberg also keeps reminding us) the only responsible thing to do. Specifically, Read points to the scientifically and socio-politically well-attested fact that 'this civilisation' – by which, as by the 'Empire', he intends the hegemonic, production-and-consumption-driven capitalism now organizing almost all of human life – "will not achieve the Paris climate accord goals; and that means that we will most likely see 3-4 degrees of global overheat at a minimum, and *that* is not compatible with civilisation as we know it".

On this basis he identifies three possibilities for what lies ahead. The first, and scariest, is terminal and irredeemable collapse into famine, chaos and war. The second is a process of breakdown which nevertheless manages to 'seed' some kind of viable successor civilisation

as it occurs. The third, and by far the least likely, is that our present civilisation will transform itself rapidly and radically enough to survive (although this would have to involve changes so far-reaching that we should still no longer be able to speak straightforwardly about *the same* civilisation). Read then presents the rest of the book as essentially an exploration of how to think about and prepare the way for some version of the second, and in his view the most probable, of these options.

How *not* to think about it, in the first place, is to try to ignore its likelihood: several early chapters deal with ways of attempting this. One way, less often encountered now than formerly but sadly still with us, is pretending that the “scientific debate” about anthropogenic climate change remains moot, so that deniers (often funded and promoted by the fossil fuel industry) continue to have some legitimate claim to be heard. This should by now be for the birds. Another and perhaps more durable mode of denial is techno-optimism, which “encourages us to believe that everything comes in the form of problems (rather than tragedies or mysteries)”, and leads us in the direction of geoengineering and other ‘solutions’ which flagrantly violate the precautionary principle, and therefore should be ruled out as such. More insidious still, given its widespread mainstream adoption, is what Read skewers as the fantasy of ‘green growth’ – “the same old ‘Prometheanism’ in disguise”, because net economic growth of *any* kind must put further strain on ecological systems already at or past breaking point.

With denialism dismissed, he then turns to how we might rise up in response to what confronts us – since without the revolution which that suggests, nothing except unredeemed collapse seems to beckon. This takes us quite quickly to Extinction Rebellion and how its success might most effectively be pursued. On the way, however, comes what is probably the most philosophically interesting bit of the book: the claim that

“however bad the odds against us get, if hope remains in us then hope really does remain. For there never really are, strictly speaking, *odds* at all.”

What he means by this superficially perverse insistence (he has been noting shortly beforehand that “it would be a very brave person who would bet on XR’s victory”, and betting of course does imply odds) is that as creative human agents we are not *outside* our prospects, calculating probabilities empirically and investing or withholding hope (that is, placing our bets) accordingly. Rather, our hopes are themselves crucial determinants of likelihoods which are always still open to be shaped and played for. Bravery of conviction is thus vitally capable of being self-validating. Human beings really can, as Shelley has it,

“hope, till hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates”.

A decided take on the perennial free-will issue will be recognised here by anyone with a philosophical background, but Read makes the case powerfully in the simplest language: “You aren’t a spectator to what is unfolding. You are part of it”. This insight has the potential to liberate us from an utterly dispiriting sense that the kind of transformation which we need is just too far-reaching to stand a chance of coming about, and it marks a pivotal moment in the book’s whole argument. For here we see how unflinching honesty about the prospect of human extinction can actually inspire and empower, rather than disabling, vigorous practical action to open up alternative possibilities.

This matters crucially, because the point about Extinction Rebellion, as Read makes very clear, is that its demands must otherwise be recognised as *impossible*. Most evidently, the demand that the UK achieve carbon-neutrality by 2025 is

“simply not reconcilable with even a reformed version of politics or economics as usual. [It] could only be accommodated by putting in progress a revolutionary transformation in our entire way of life” (p.27)

The scale and speed of change required for ‘this civilisation’ to phase out most of its carbon-dependent activities within five years (a requirement, says the science implacably, if we are to have even a 50% chance of avoiding climate catastrophe) has absolutely no precedent in human affairs, including in any previous social revolution which history records. Only if we are ready to be robustly undaunted by this fact, in a spirit of recognizing that whatever odds are relevant are finally down to us, are there any realistic grounds for the kind of hope which might genuinely transform things.

And with this we come to the central difficulty which these three publications have the enormous merit of exposing, but which they all fail adequately to address. For there to be any chance of seeding a viable successor civilisation, rebellion against the prospect of extinction – that is, large numbers of people deciding that enough is enough and that they themselves must now rise up against the governing arrangements which have brought us to this pass – must not just continue to spread like wildfire (in a bitter Antipodean analogy), but must very rapidly consolidate itself from organised mass protest into this wholly unexampled kind of revolution. And revolution, however unexampled, will have to mean at least what it has always meant: the old, vicious regime – in this case, the fossil-fuel state (and most immediately, here in teetering post-Brexit Britain) – must be disabled, delegitimised and then overturned. If that sounds just too wildly implausible, given where we are starting from, recall Read on hope. But while the cultural, attitudinal and to some extent the political *preconditions* of such a revolution are compellingly laid out by him and Hallam between them, the form of its *practical imaginability* remains importantly unclear. Or rather (which comes to the same thing), the form which they both endorse – the emergence from rebellious civil disobedience of a network of deliberative Citizens’ Assemblies which will increasingly assume executive authority – is a long way from being as persuasive as they both take it to be.

As to the preconditions, the later chapters of Read’s book include crisp accounts of the various ways in which we shall need to change our thinking if any revolution at all is to come about: welcoming economic localization, strengthening other local sinews of resilience, pursuing simplicity, using technology much more critically and making education far fitter for purpose. While most of this has figured in green advocacy before, it is here collected together to great effect and with all the authority which a starting-point of stark honesty can supply. His chapter on the role of the teacher should be required reading for everyone in a secondary or tertiary educational setting, while that on living hopefully into and through the disasters which are now inevitable – potentially rediscovering real community in the process – should be required reading for everyone.

Again, Hallam’s pamphlet *Common Sense for the 21st Century* (explicitly modelled on Tom Paine’s 1776 primer for the American revolution) pulls no punches in cataloguing the

inadequacies of reformist approaches to climate change – the whole sorry tale of self-satisfied political and institutional incuria which has resulted in the now-looming emergency.

“To put it bluntly, NGOs, political parties and movements which have brought us through the last thirty years of abject failure – a 60% rise in global CO2 emissions since 1990 – are now the biggest block to transformation... They offer gradualist solutions which they claim will work. It is time to admit that this is false, and a lie... The penny has finally dropped – the corrupt system is going to kill us unless we rise up.”

And he then argues compellingly for mass civil disobedience as the only means left to us to trigger change of the order required in the time available. Writing with the authority of a close student as well as a seasoned practitioner of this mode of collective action, he makes an eloquent case, accompanied by much practical wisdom relating to the various organizational demands – choosing targets, sequencing planned developments, ensuring inclusivity, supporting arrestees and managing respectful (and therefore all the more challenging) relations with the police.

But the crunch issue remains that of the role ascribed to Citizens’ Assemblies, which both writers see as essential to any successful transition from rebellion to the embedding of revolutionary change. Read doesn’t address this issue in his book, but does so in his pamphlet *Truth and its consequences*, an XR discussion paper starting from the same uncompromisingly honest premises as the book and one which he has judged, rightly, to have a wider-than-internal interest. The introduction of these assemblies represents XR’s third demand on government (after telling the truth about climate emergency and committing to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2025), and it is meant to be implemented when civil disobedience has become so extensively disruptive that concession will have become the authorities’ only alternative to dangerously provocative repression.

The model for them is familiar enough from the literature on deliberative democracy and to a limited extent also from recent practice. A group of (depending on topic and context) between two dozen and two hundred members of the general public, socio-demographically calibrated to mirror the population at large, is assembled through random selection to address a specific policy question or questions. The group is comprehensively briefed by relevant experts and stakeholders, and professionally facilitated in careful deliberation leading to the production of agreed recommendations. The process is supposed to yield a much stronger representativeness than can be achieved by elected legislative bodies, many of whose members will be people for whom many electors didn’t vote: decisions reached by a randomly selected cohort of ordinary citizens deliberating seriously under conditions of maximal information (“exposed to 360⁰ understanding of an issue”, as Hallam puts it) would in principle have been reached by any other such cohort, and so since they would have been agreed by anyone can reliably be taken to stand in the name of everyone. As a corollary, citizen deliberation is also claimed to be able to take on issues too difficult or potentially divisive to be tackled by elected politicians with their eyes on short-term re-election, exposed to all the pressures of corporate and other influence and operating under 24-hour media scrutiny. Its upshots will have a correspondingly greater democratic legitimacy.

These claims for the approach are clearly not to be dismissed out of hand. Well-conducted Citizens' Assemblies might significantly change the political dynamics of many controversial and conflicted issues, or at least help to do so. The trouble is that both Hallam (emphatically) and Read (somewhat more hesitantly) are offering them here as a kind of panacea – not merely a useful consultative or advisory adjunct, but a mechanism to which legislative authority for dealing with the climate emergency should be swiftly handed over. To this idea there are two serious objections.

The first is simply that its chances of working are far too uncertain. Even if established politicians could be persuaded to concede real legislative power to such fora (perhaps, as Read suggests, by giving them some degree of formal input into the deliberative process itself), the stark fact remains that assembly cohorts would be selected, however randomly, from an electorate among whom less than three people in every hundred voted for a credible Green agenda at the most recent opportunity. And recall that this is not much less than the 3.5% which XR thinks it can gain its demands by getting actively out on the streets – so its Assemblies, if they happened, would still be reflecting more or less the current attitudinal profile of society. There is indeed now a much wider public recognition of the danger than even a couple of years ago, and XR is owed much of the credit for that. But recognition is one thing, and signing up to turning your life-arrangements inside out is another. Even with full information, exhaustive discussion and the best will in the world, it is surely implausible to suppose that random groups culled from this electorate could rise far enough above interested motives and residual partisanship to take all the hard decisions and commit to all of what will inevitably be seen as the sacrifices, now necessary to retrieve a viable civilisation. The deliberative process, with its juxtaposition of sometimes harshly antagonistic viewpoints under the aegis of respectful rational discussion, has been shown to have the power to change minds and reconcile startling differences. But appealing, as both writers do, to the successes of such deliberation in other contexts and on other topics is really beside the point here. The examples cited are all of minds changed and decisions reached on limited and containable, albeit controversial, matters – abortion and homosexuality in Eire, immigration in Belgium, flood protection in Poland... – but there is no precedent at all for dealing in this way with the fundamental, across-the-board economic and social changes which the climate emergency now demands. (Read, elsewhere so acute on the weakness of alleged historical analogies for our plight, relies on a quite uncharacteristic deference to the Irish experience in his pamphlet.)

That objection by itself is not insuperable. As Hallam justly points out, there are no guarantees; reformist attempts made through the existing political system have indeed lamentably failed, and if we merely thought that citizen deliberation represented our last best shot, we should still be obligated to try it. But the second objection goes deeper: and here it is Hallam's own account, in particular, which calls it forth. He contends for Citizens' Assemblies on the grounds that they create "a forum where deliberation and reason will finally be given space to trump the power and corruption of big money". Unimpeachably democratic, they allow hitherto-excluded ordinary people to break free from a deeply compromised system dominated by capital and "neo-liberal elites" which is threatening humanity with extinction. Again, their introduction will channel the growing rage and impatience of these ordinary people at "unaccountable global elites" who have "been

robbing us for 30 years [and] are now going to take us to our deaths". All this represents not just an implausible panacea, but a remarkable crudity both of diagnosis and of proposed remedy.

Hallam, in fact, as the whole tenor of expression and argument in this pamphlet demonstrates, and as anyone who has seen any of his video appearances can also testify, has the charismatic force and focus, but also the radically simplifying vision of the fanatic. The green movement has been so woefully lacking for so long in leaders with the former characteristics, and the danger is now so extreme, that it is hard not to cheer his emergence and buy into the simplification as its necessary price. And of course, revolutionaries do need to simplify: brutal concentration on the three or four things that *must* be done, at whatever cost (carbon rationing; a citizen's income to make economic shake-out survivable; an end to recreational flying...) could only help to keep us engaged with the realities we face. But there is an absolutely vital difference between that and simplifying *out* the genuine tragedy of our plight, which is what Hallam's kind of rationale for citizen deliberation tries to do.

That plight, to repeat, is tragic in the full sense of the term. It has arisen because deep-seated features of the Enlightenment spirit which has produced so much worthwhile life-improvement across the world have also generated a pervasive inability to rein in the relevant activities before they do irreversible damage. Distinctive human strengths which Western civilisation in particular has realised – rationally-deliberated choices, the basing of belief on evidence and empirical testing, liberation from ignorance and superstition – are rooted in aspirations to mastery and control which have now jeopardised the biosphere. The dramatic material successes hitherto consequent on our strengths have worked to blind us to what we are doing in exercising them, and indeed to neutralise most strivings towards self-recognition. All the classic ingredients of tragedy are here. It follows that attempting to blame everything on elites or corporations, while an understandable reaction, is essentially an exercise in scapegoating. Corporations, for instance, exercise irresponsible power, create deleterious pseudo-needs through advertising, and cause ecological havoc in pursuit of short-term financial interests. But they could not do these things, indeed they would not exist in their current forms, had not aspiring billions across the globe (taking their cue from, but no longer confined to, the West) been eager to buy their products and benefit materially from their innovations. Correspondingly, we have brought this disaster upon ourselves not in the main through the traditional vices of pride and hatred, but by the over-indulgence of what are in themselves perfectly creditable passions and desires – for equality, for recognition and respect, for general material betterment (that is, for the elimination of squalor, hunger and disease, as well as for lives smoothed and facilitated by 'consumer goods'). And in this tragedy, almost everyone – including almost anyone randomly selected by sortition from amongst 'ordinary people' – is thoroughly implicated.

What has now closed on us all, in fact, is the trap which Enlightenment set for itself from the outset. The real danger of the citizen-deliberative panacea is that it represents a last-ditch attempt to refuse recognition of this fact, by reasserting a version of the central Enlightenment delusion – that rational humanity can have it all: that our key values, justice *and* democracy *and* liberty *and* technological mastery *and* universal material well-being on a habitable planet, can still all be achieved together. The peril here is not just failure to see that these values are coming into increasingly intractable conflict, although such failure can

only promote helpless lurches into utopianism. More fundamentally, it is that we thereby nullify the only kind of hope that could now save us, the deep hope which Read invokes as capable of recasting the empirical odds. Releasing the power of such hope within us depends, as he points out, on recognising that we are not spectators of our situation; but that is *precisely* the stance of the paradigm Enlightenment self, constituted by the aspiration to reflective detachment from all its potential beliefs and actions until it has been able to accord them rational warrant. Acknowledging our tragic nature, our liability always to be caught up in real and painful value-dilemmas beyond the reach of reason, is the only way in which a post-religious age can refuse that lethal misrepresentation of human agency and repossess the sense of ourselves as whole, embedded, challenged and struggling but still creative beings, out of which the force of life-hope perpetually springs. And lacking that force, we will seed no successor civilisation.

So what form might a *tragically-responsible* approach to rebellion against looming extinction take? That is the epochal question up to which these writings and their consideration conduct us. It is certainly not one to be answered in a concluding paragraph. But readers of a critique such as the foregoing are owed at least an outline sketch of how one might set about addressing it.

Most evidently, it will not be an approach which expects to find win-win solutions, where all our important commitments can be honoured. Nor indeed will it seek *solutions* at all – the default misconstrual of tragic dilemmas as problems (or wicked problems, or super-wicked problems...), with therefore some form of solution at least in the frame, is another last resort of Enlightenment and must be jettisoned as such. The kinds of dilemma which we shall increasingly face will not be susceptible of being solved, but only of being lived through, in a mode which might perhaps be called *rough coping* – a habit of *making do*, in which there is no settled presumption that the future will improve on the past nor that major disasters will all be averted, and full recognition that we will often face grievous challenges which we cannot surmount. Crucially, this means that getting humanity through the emergency with some capacity to regenerate anything recognizable as civilization may well require us to sacrifice in practice some of the values which we have become routinely accustomed to think of civilization as embodying. Universal abstract justice is likely to be one, and democracy as recently practiced another. (In the latter connection, it should be noted that the counting of muddled heads has just given us both Brexit and Boris, while a twisted version of it gave the USA Trump, and may even re-impose him – so that a period of chastened silence from its partisans might be thought appropriate.) That need not involve abandoning electoral politics altogether, and there is also much scope for developing deliberative extensions or alternatives to it, with a major role for intensifying mass civil disobedience to put pressure in that direction on the system. This needs, however, to form just one part of a portfolio of activities undertaken by a consciously vanguard movement acting explicitly in the real interests of the people at large. These activities must include coordinating the build-up of resilience to climate-driven unravelling based on the strengths of interconnected well-placed communities – the partial breakdowns likely to flow from a mismanaged Brexit will soon offer plenty of scope for trialling this approach. Action should also include networking to promote and precipitate the organized, phased withdrawal of cooperation by key professional groups – teachers, lawyers, civil servants, public administrators, local government officers – comprised of people capable of appreciating the

issues, and on whose compliance the continuing legitimacy of the fossil-fuel state depends. (Thinking people don't rule the world, but a highly complex society can't now be ruled without them.) Nor should we exclude the possibility of collaborating with well-planned sabotage directed against the infrastructure of the fossil-fuel economy (a possibility which of course raises the difficult further question of whether non-violence can remain a categorical commitment).

All these activities, to combine successfully, will need to be coordinated by a revolutionary green-political protagonist of which, despite the desperate urgency of our situation and the valiant example of XR, there is still no real sign. The Green Party with which we are currently blessed persists in trying to be a kind of thinking person's Liberal Democrats, and any suggestion that it should reconceive itself along more Bolshevik lines would probably call forth howls of outrage. But, as the three courageous and inspiring publications which I have been reviewing make plain, our tragedy actually demands nothing less. Those on whom the responsibility for bringing a real revolutionary force into being must now devolve – that is, inevitably, the green-political activist intelligentsia – should therefore study these writings both carefully and critically, and (as we say up North), think on.

But not for too long. Rapid action is now imperative.

John Foster
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